A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUNJABI POETRY

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From eleventh century onwards, foreign invasions into Northern India and Punjab caused the gradual disintegration of the fabric of the society, its law and order and the political traditions of its people. It was a nasty blow to the society at large and its cultural traditions.

As it is always the case with invaders, they consolidate their position. The first thing they have to do is to destroy the native language of the people, resulting in destruction of the common culture of the people.

Persian and Arabic languages were imposed and people were subjected to learn these colonial languages.

Education system was changed and schools began to teach these languages. Middle classes took to it readily as to get good jobs for themselves and their children, the whole business of commerce began to be conducted in these languages. It infiltrated into law courts and in order to get any justice a person has to have a consultation with a legal representative who was well verse in the languages of invaders.

Thus wholesale exploitation of poor and underprivileged began to happen and the ruling classes had a hay day, by seizing land from the Punjabi peasants and profiteering in other ways.

As the invaders were mostly Muslims and the conquered people mostly Hindus, a seed of conflict was sown between the two classes. Mullahs and Pundits became the leaders of their own sects and gained much prestige. They soon imposed their own laws and ideologies on the illiterate masses and people had no choice but to obey them.

The situation became intolerable. The sensitives, the poets, the freethinker rose in unison against this oppression by the ruling classes. Saints, Sadhus and Sufis came forward and preached a greater law of humanity than the narrow law of the kings, the powerful and of the ruling bureaucrats.

As a backlash, emergence of Punjabi language occurred, co joined with popular mass movement of the people of Punjab. These new thinkers found Punjabi as an excellent vehicle to propagate their new ideas of equality and justice, for all the people irrespective of their caste or creed. This language spoke directly to people as against the language of the middle classes who always conversed in Arabic Persian dialect.

A new era of classical Punjabi poetry was ushered in starting with Baba Farid and ending with Waris Shah and Bulleh Shah. The other major poet of Punjabi who came after them was Guru Nanak.

Earlier Punjabi language had no script of its own and was written in Landha or Mahajani script and which had no vowel sounds but which had to be imagined. With the birth of Sikhism a new alphabet was needed urgently, for the language to define a separate cultural identity and a vehicle for the new religious teachings.

Landha or Mahajani scripts were derived from Sanskrit and did not represent all the sounds contained in Punjabi language. Muslim poet wrote their Punjabi writings in Persian script and it was called Shahmukhi script or the script uttered from the mouth of Shah or the king.

The second Sikh Guru Angad Dev did a great service to Punjabi people by inventing a new script called Gurmukhi or utterings from the mouth of the guru. It had

thirty five letters in its alphabet to incorporate all the sounds, not found in other languages. Muslims Punjabi writers always have an inbuilt prejudice against Gurmukhi script, even up to the present day and still carries on with Shahmukhi script especially in Pakistan.

The same things used to happen among Punjabi Hindu writers who wrote their Punjabi in Hindi script.

The birth of Khalsa or Sikhism is deeply entwined with Punjabi poetry as almost all the Sikh Gurus were accomplished poets/musicians and created moving verses set to classical music and thus laid the foundation fora new religious utterings combined with a quest for Punjabi identity. In a sense Guru Nanak was the first real 'Punjabi' who gave its inhabitants a pride in reclaiming their separate identity.

Following is the short chronology of ten Sikh Gurus:

Guru Nanak Dev Ji - (1469-1539) The founder of Sikhism who preached the brotherhood of man and equality of sexes. He travelled over vast distances including India, Tibet, Shri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia and taught his message of peace and love. A prolific poet who composed hymns and other compositions which became the basis of Adi Granth.

Guru Angad Dev Ji – (1539-1552) The guru who devised new alphabet of Gurmukhi thus giving people an identity, a faith and beginning of a new Punjabi sensibility.

Guru Amardas Ji - (1552-1574) He condemned and demolished the practice of Sati (widow burning) and divided Punjab into 22 districts of Sikh faith and appointed a learned preacher as the head of each.

Guru Ram Das Ji - (1574-1581) He founded the holy city of Amritsar and laid the foundation of the pool of nectar at Golden Temple.

Guru Arjan Dev Ji – (1581-1606) He organised Sikhism into a fresh mission and stated that no field of life whether temporal, social or political was to be excluded from the operation of mystic venerations and the divine light. He was the first Guru to be tortured by the Mogul Emperors of India and was later executed. He compiled Adi Granth as the sole scriptural authority for the Sikhs.

Guru Har Gobind Ji – (1606-1644)

Guru Har Rai Ji – (1630-1661)

Guru Har Kishen Ji – (1661-1664)

Guru Teg Bahadur Ji - (1664-1675) This was a period when there was a wholesale forced conversion of Hindus to Islam. The Pundits from all over India approached him for spiritual guidance. He challenged the Mogul emperor Aurangzeb and was tried and beheaded for championing the cause of Hindus.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji – (1675 -1708) The great warrior poet who founded the Khalsa panth and gave Sikh their distinctive dress code.

There was a revival of Punjabi poetry under the reign of Sikh king, Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) who was a great pattern of arts and encouraged poets and painters to his durbar. He was a secular king and did not make Sikhism as the state religion and employed Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims to top places in his cabinet.

The British were at the door of Punjab by then as they have annexed rest of India already and looking for

Ranjit Singh to die so they could snatch this last out post to British Empire. Due to internal dissention after the death of Ranjit Singh, the Sikh army lost the battles and British rule was imposed on Punjab in 1849.

The British imposed their own rules and regulations. Urdu became the official legal language and teaching of Punjabi was prohibited in the schools. They brainwashed the people with the notion that Urdu was a superior language for the literati and the Punjabi language was only fit for the peasants. It was a good ploy for divide and rule strategy.

The Punjabi literature went into decline until Bhai Vir Singh came on the scene. He was the doyen of modern Punjabi literature and established a new land mark with his first novel Sundari.

He became an example to others and a new generation of Punjabi poets, playwrights, novelists were born .Among the prominent poets was Bhai Vir Singh himself together with contemporary writers such as Amrita Pritam and Shiv Kumar Batalvi.

Baba Farid – (1173-1266)

He is the Chaucer of the Punjabi poetry. He was a mystic and belonged to radical sufi Chishti School. He participated in people's struggles for salvation as against the ideologies of supremacy of the ruling classes. He built his poetry on simple expressions based on folk traditions, typically being the Dohra or a couplet. Though simple in form, his poetry disclosed a deep truth about human life.

Dohra - Baba Farid.

Farid Kaaley maindey kaprey, kaala mainda wais,

Gunahan Bharehan main pheraan, Lok kahain dervish

Oh Farida! I have taken to
Wearing black clothes and my
Whole garb is of black phase
Full of sins a dress I wear
But people call me a dervish.

Bulleh Shah – (1680-1758)

He is one of the greatest Sufi poets of Punjab and was so unorthodox in his life that he was refused by the Muslim priest to be buried in the community grave yard after his death. He was born as Abdullah Shah but changed his name according to poetical convictions. He had sister and like him, remained celibate and spend her life in meditation. Under master Inayat Shah he achieved great poetical and spiritual attainments.

In the city of love I got lost
Being cleansed, I am withdrawing
From my head, feet and hands
I even got rid of my eyes
I have attained my goal
It has ended so well.

O Bulleha! Lord prevails everywhere
Now none appears a stranger to me.

Quazi and mullah stray away
And paddle their religion
like hawkers
They are like bird trappers
Of this world
And throw away their nets
Everywhere to catch innocents.

Waris Shah – (1736-1790)

In the tradition of Punjabi Quisa, the arrival of Waris Shah was an epoch making event. His Heer Ranja is a romance of star crossed lovers who are doomed to a tragic end, something akin to Romeo and Juliet of Shakespeare. This ballad like form consists of 600 stanzas and is full of a true classical dimension of beauty and pathos.

It depicts in details the customs of Punjab, lives of ordinary men and woman and tenderness of love. It has been reviewed as a sociological, artistic and mystical episode in the secular spirit of Punjab. It is sung in a special mode of musical composition based on folk and classical ragas. It is popular in both sides of Punjab and when rendered by a competent singer, can reduce its listners to tears.

It is very difficult to render in translation the flavour & sounds of Punjabi words but below I give extract from my own composition which is directly inspired by this quisa. Heer was forced to marry against her wishes but was not happy with her forced marriage as she was always pinning for her lost lover Ranja.

Ranja then renounced his family and became an ascetic or a jogi. He calls upon Heer for alms but she failed to recognize him in his new guise with shaven head and ringed ears. Heer refused to believe that she will ever see her beloved Ranja again. She thus complains:-

HEER SAYAL.

No soul enamoured in this wide world
That can bring about my heart's satiation

Certainty within my soul will never again
Gaze upon starred face of Ranja yaar
And never again the buds of my heart
Blossom anew in cloudy tales of romance.

I will sell my skull for vessel to be made
My dark tresses for silken rope to be woven
My gory skin for the shoes to be soled
And gauged eyes to blinds for instructions.
Oh my lord if my heart was not so worn
Glimpse of Ranja yaar was enough
To restore my soul.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

A great poet and founder of a new religion and saw invasion of Punjab by Baber, the first mogul king and misery of his people as it result. He took up poetry to give a voice of protest against this cruel fate of Punjab. He championed the cause of week, the poor and the women and incorporated into his verses a new innovation of poetical form and expression.

He composed verses of great beauty about divinity, human relationship with God and the salvation of an individual through a philosophical teaching which though simple in appearance speaks of great profundity. His composition Japji Sahib gives essence of his teaching and is set in vigorous verses. It is used by faithful as their daily meditation.

Following extracts are taken from Prof. Puran Singh's translation.

He is One. He is first. He is all that is.
His name is Truth.
He is the Creator of all.

Fearing naught, striking fear in naught
His Form, on lands and waters
Is Eternity; the One Self-existent.

Through the Grace of His servant
Continually repeat His name
He was in the beginning
He is though all ages
He shall be the One
Who lives for ever.

Abundant is His mercy, as great as Himself
He giveth and giveth, taketh not even
A mustard seed from aught else.

The great warriors beg their might from Him
and numberless wrecks of sin wait at his Door.

There are others who receive His plenty
and eating His Bread deny Him
fools think not on His mysteries.

In Thy courtyard die thousands of hunger
and of the ills of flesh.

O Almighty Giver! this too is Thy mercy
this too is Thy love.

By Thy will the chains of the prisoners drop
the bound are freed and the free are bound
who else could divine Thy purpose ?

If any dare go against Thy Will
he will know for himself how painful
to him is his pride.

He knows us better than we know ourselves.

Guru Gobind Singh.

His writings have universal appeal touching the tender strings of heart and arousing courage for a life of purposeful action.

He wrote his 'Zafarnama' in chaste Persian to Mogul king Aurangzeb reminding him of the teachings of Quran as opposed to plunders of his army against the week and the destitutes of India.

Dasam Granth is anthology of his writings, a voluminous book of 1066 pages in gurmukhi. He gave Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of Sikhs, its final form and as a scriptural authority for the people to follow. He was the last guru of the Sikhs.

He is the perfect example of manhood, highly educated, chivalrous and generous in character.

His mission was to transcend sectarianism as he considered God as beyond religions and division of mankind into castes, colours and nationalities as meaningless.

Some spend all their lives in dark jungles
In useless endeavours wasting their lives
Pay attention as I speak the truth
Only who love can find God.
Some worship stones
Some hang lingams around their necks
Some says God dwells in the South
Others worship the west
Some worship idols or put trust in tombs
All go astray in false rituals
None knows the secrets of God.

Without wisdom they are ever
Subject to fearful death
Shivas come and go
Incarnations of Rama and Krishna
Are many
But all in the end
Went their way under noose of death.

Bhai Vir Singh – (1872-1957)

The father of modern Punjabi literature, he single handed brought a renaissance of Punjabi poetry. He was the first one to use blank verse form in poetry and was the author of numerous novels, plays and poetry collections. He was a pioneer in starting first Punjabi daily newspaper. Winner of many literary awards and he was a grand personality. He gave Punjabi verse a sophistication and new expressions.

In his poem **Iagian Niban**, a girl is complaining about her insensitive lover.

I have fallen in love with a stone
Who owns neither laughter
Nor any expression
But I admit he is handsome
And enchants my heart
But he is so secretive of nature
And never lets me into his heart.

I wanted to run away from him
But even that I cannot depart
Though there is no warmth
In his closeness when I meet
Alas! I have to accept the situation
As I cannot bear to be without
His physical presence across my heart.

Amrita Pritam – (1917-2005)

A household name in the sphere of poetry. Her single poem 'Aj Akhan Waris Shah noo 'brought her fame across both sides of Punjab. It refers to the situation after partition of India in 1947 when thousands of people were uprooted from their homes, murdered, raped and blood flew everywhere.

She was chosen as poetess of the millennium in India and have won Sahitya Akademi award for outstanding collection of poetry Sunehray. She has published 24 novels, 15 collections of short stories and other numerous anthologies. Her work has been translated into 21 Indian languages, English, Albanian, Bulgarian, Russian, French, Polish and Spanish. Her poetry is a wonderful blend of earthiness and psychic sophistication. A lyrical quality derived from Sufi and Sikh traditions with an undercurrent of feminism.

AJ Akhan Waris Shah noo
Kite kabran wicho bol
Te Kitabe ishak da koi
Aglaa varka khol.

Today I implore Waris Shah
To speak from beyond his grave
And I ask him to open anew
A page in book of love again.

When a single daughter of Punjab cried
You penned verses upon verses of grief
Today thousand daughters of Punjab are crying
Come back and give tongues to their dark briefs.

A Needle of Light.

Our destiny has been tattered
There are torn patches in sight
My country now requires
A needle of the Light.

I was repairing my phulkari
With a needle to thread
But the earth shook
With a great fright
And broke my needle
The needle of the light.

Shiv Kumar Batalvi – (1936-1973)

A bohemian poet of Punjab who drove himself to an early death through drinks and an epilepsy. His verse play Loona won him the Sahitya Akedmi award which brought to light a new interpretation of legend of Pooran Bhagat in modern media. He expressed his inner sufferings through brilliant lyrics. Like John Keats, he was 'half in love with the easeful death'

He was uprooted from his native land by traumatic happenings of partition of India in 1947 which affected his psyche deeply, as a source of melancholy and fearful sorrow but he never expressed it in his early poetry. Only he was able to express it at the end of his poetic career. Dudh da Katal or the murder of milk which signifies murder of the milk of his mother, the mother Punjab who was murdered by its division.

I still remember it today
And you must remember it too
When together we murdered our mother
They killed my childhood they killed my mother
And a cold corpse was left at my place to rot.

have a longing to die young To go to realm of youth
After my demise.

sing to conceal my agonies Under the guise of lyrics
Sweet and serene the curses Miserable and doleful verses.

have been occupied With burning the lamps
Of my own existence, fears Feeding it with flowing oils From my own saline tears.

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MotiLal Banarsidass Publishers. Largest supplier of books on India & Indolgy. Founded 1903.
http://www.mlbd.com

All India Lierary Academi.
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Secularization of Modern Punjabi Poetry by Attar Singh
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SHADOWS OF WORDS- Autobiography by Amrita Pritam
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Legends of punjab including details on Bulleh Shah, Waris Sha & Guru Nanak.

allaboutsikhs.com/Gateway to Sikhism for Guru Gobind Singh

On writings of Guru Gobind Singh & online version of Sri Guru Granth Sahib,
the Adi Granth see www.sikhseek.com